'Iron Maidens' vs. the 'Witless Pet': Typecasting the Woman Politician in Editorial Cartoons and Memes

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Abstract

Woven into the fabric of our everyday life, different forms of media insinuate messages that restore traditional hierarchies of male-female relationships and signal the incongruity between 'woman' and the man-dominated public sphere. Among these, editorial cartoons and internet memes (their more recent offspring) play their part in naturalising the patriarchal order when representing women politicians, reiterating thus societal norms and cultural assumptions that confine woman to the domestic space (albeit through verbal-visual forms of humour, mockery or caricature). Combining insights from semiotics with Kanter's theory of the "role traps" (1993) devised for women in leading positions, the paper will address instances of gender stereotyping and typecasting in editorial cartoons and internet memes which mediate representations of female political leaders (from Hillary Clinton and Theresa May to Viorica Dăncilă, Romania's first woman prime minister) both as records of public controversies that affect a community at a given time, as well as clues to the discourses which normalise a gendered-biased "homo politicus".

Keywords: *editorial cartoon, internet meme, gender, stereotyping, politics, women's 'role traps'*

Since the latter decades of the twentieth century, when the women's liberation movement pressed for the intellectual, cultural and political re-evaluation of their roles in society, normative patriarchal ideologies have seemed to have lost their grip, lifting the barriers to women's full assertion in all spheres of life, including accessing occupational roles or following successful careers in areas traditionally reserved for men. One notable example is provided by the realm of politics, historically constructed as a public area of masculine interaction and agency, where, of late, an increasing number of women politicians have come to visibility in key positions as parliamentarians, prime-ministers, even heads of state or presidents of world organisations. Yet, despite such optimistic cultural messages and records of individual (female) success

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in top political positions, deep-rooted societal norms and cultural assumptions still sanction women who break traditional gender roles and command attention in the public space as "the odd ones out".

Given the contemporary dominance of the media (Stocchetti & Kukkonen 2011), it is often through its forms that messages aiming to restore traditional hierarchies of male-female relationships and signal the incongruity between "woman" and the man-dominated public sphere (Wood 2009) are popularised. For example, a recent study on the representation of women politicians in news discourse remarks that the latter "are not only under-reported, but when they do feature in news discourse, they are often trivialised, sexualised, or commodified, their sex seeming to be the most interesting thing about them from the perspective of journalists" (Ross, Jansen & Bürger 2020: 233). The same study draws attention to a common journalistic practice in terms of an invariable recourse to "some catch-all identikit woman-politician frames" that "reinforce and recycle a set of gendered scripts which collapse difference and provoke (often unfavourable) comparisons with the man-politician 'norm'" (237).

Nevertheless, such gendered frames are also replicated by other media forms, among which editorial cartoons and their more recent offspring, the internet memes, may bear fruitful ground to prove the persistence of societal norms that inform the perception of what being "male" or "female" means, providing thus a glimpse into the cultural values and assumptions shared between authors and audiences.

On the one hand, an editorial cartoon may seem very different from an internet meme: one being an image fully created by an artist, the other an amateur mimicking, overlapping or remix of already existing ones, made by and circulated among Internet users. On the other hand, the two forms may be seen to share common characteristics since they both aim to trigger various humour mechanisms and make their satirical point by resorting to visual and verbal codes which are known to and agreed upon by their audience. As such, stereotypes (irrespective of gender) are a characteristic tool for both cartoons and memes, providing their creators with a handy visual script which can encode and thus simplify complex messages to ensure their impact on the viewers. Nevertheless, when it comes to the portrayal of women in positions of political power, their visual rhetoric often reverts to gender stereotyping that emphasises their subjects' womanly status by alluding to culturally constructed oppositions between masculinity – femininity

and their related range of dichotomic attributes (active – passive, domineering – subservient, rational – emotional, powerful – weak, or related to the public or the domestic sphere, respectively).

In view of the above, the paper sets to investigate the mediatised representations of female political leaders in the U.S. (Hillary Clinton), the U.K. (Theresa May) and Romania (Viorica Dăncilă) as constructed concurrently by editorial cartoons and internet memes. Placed within the socio-political contexts provided by the 2016 American presidency elections, the Brexit crisis shadowing the 2016-2019 premiership of Theresa May, and the controversies surrounding the 2018-2019 governing of the Romanian Social Democratic Party under the premiership of Viorica Dăncilă, the chosen texts will be approached by combining insights from semiotics and visual discourse analysis (Barthes 1968; Hodge & Kress 1988) with a discursive approach to representation (Hall 1997) and a broader feminist perspective on gender stereotyping and women's role traps (Kanter 1993; Baxter 2018). Though generally considered "visual sites of contestation…[and] resistance" (Shim 2017 q. in Gallagher 2019), the comparative analysis of both mediums across the three cultural spaces will aim to show that their representations remain gender-biased, hence, far from challenging societal perceptions, reinforce patriarchal assumptions, contributing to "the symbolic annihilation" (Gilmartin & Brunn 1998: 535) of women politicians in the media.

From editorial cartoons to internet memes
Editorial cartooning is an illustration art that has survived the test of time (as well as that of technology), having leaped from the print newspaper page to the web, where nowadays it vies for attention in the social media with the internet meme.

Its roots are often connected to the technique of caricature, defined as "the distorted presentation of a person, type, or action" (Ames 2017), which is considered to have been brought into shape with Leonardo da Vinci's sketches of human subjects that displayed exaggerated and deformed facial contours (Barker 2016: 48-9). Another strand that entered its genealogy is represented by grotesquery, an art form born in Ancient Rome and rediscovered during the Renaissance to then spread as a popular style mixing "hybrid [animal, human, vegetable] forms and artistic licence" (Smith-Laing 2015) in pictorial comedy.

Nevertheless, editorial cartoons as a staple of journalism – currently understood as graphic presentations on the editorial page of the (printed) news media which provide humorous or satiric comments on contemporary social and political events and figures (hence the term "political cartoons" is often employed interchangeably) – were eventually legitimised by the advent of the printing press, and, in due time, the evolution of newspapers and periodicals throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. Formative influences for the genre were William Hogarth's engravings which satirised the social and political corruption of his age through caricature and subversive graphic humour. A generation later, James Gillray further established the template through his political caricatures ridiculing state figures and public events of the late 18th century, which reached a wide public through broadsheets and prints. Nevertheless, it is in the 19th century that certain humour periodicals, like the *Punch* magazine, will start to focus on pictorial content, providing thus an institutionalised frame for the cartoon to be perfected into a form that closely resembles the present-day one, while also helping, at the same time, popularise the genre, since "[b]y the mid-19th century, major political newspapers in many countries featured cartoons designed to express the publisher's opinion on the politics of the day" (Norman Rocket Museum 2020).

Throughout the twentieth century, when newspapers became the primary vehicle through which editorial cartoons reached a mass audience, the genre achieved cultural as well as scholarly recognition, at the same time at which it had to adapt to the advances in computer technology which opened a new range of techniques for image creation and manipulation. Yet, since the 2000s, the greatest challenge to this distinct form of visual communication (placed on the interstice of art and journalism) has been brought by the internet, which "has promoted a gradual but inexorable decline in newspaper circulation and readership as readers eschew metropolitan dailies in favour of online news content providers" (Leon 2017: 163). This has led to unstable full-time employment opportunities for newsprint media cartoonists, at the same time at which it has opened new venues for disseminating their work "via self-publication on their website, Twitter feed or blog," or by "find[ing] their cartoons spread virally via email and social media reaching audiences outside the newspaper readership" (Leon 2017: 172).

This "leap" to the online medium has also implied competition from other forms of digital communication that populate it. One such

recent and widespread example is provided by the internet meme, sometimes seen simply as "a cut-and-paste Internet joke" (Kuipers 2015 q. in Soare 2019), or, in a more extended definition, considered to be "an imitable text that Internet users appropriate, adjust and share in the digital sphere … to comment on or discuss all possible issues, from the personal to the societal" (Denisova 2019: 10). If the term "meme" predates its internet association being first employed in 1976 by the biologist Richard Dawkins to denote "cultural units that spread from person to person through imitation" (Gal 2018), it has since entered popular usage as "variants of a particular image, video, cliche, etc. that share a common theme and are disseminated by a large number of users" (Zannettou et al. 2018).

In her *Memes in Digital Culture*, Limor Shifman identifies nine major genres that map the meme corpus circulated on the Internet, namely: reaction photoshops (images generated with editing software from existing photographs); photo fads (staged photos of subjects who pose in different settings); flash mobs (a video or photograph of a sudden gathering of people who perform a simultaneous act before suddenly vanishing); lipsynch (video clips in which the lip movement of an individual or group is matched to a song's vocals); misheard lyrics (video clips with inserted subtitles mistranslating the spoken words); recut trailers (counterfeit trailers that usually parody the original ones); LOLCats (image macros featuring funny photos of cats and misspelled captions); stock character macros (captioned images that feature animal or human characters standing for stereotypical behaviours); rage comics (amateur drawn cartoon faces and characters meant to illustrate various emotions) (2014: 100-118).

From these, memes that rely on static images (be it a photo with an added text caption, a photoshopped collage, or rage comics) may be seen as a cruder, amateur variant of editorial cartoons, since, though differently authored and constructed, both ask the interpreter to decode their visual and verbal signs and to grasp the allusions or the intertextual references they establish in order to interpret what is typically "a subversive critical message" (Gal 2018) that the two aim to communicate. In addition to their common use of the visual and verbal modes, both forms also rely on metaphors and symbols to convey messages and opinions, at the same time at which they resort to humour mechanisms (like incongruity or superiority) or derived forms (like parody and satire) to "achieve a number of rhetorical goals

simultaneously: they entertain, explain, evaluate and simplify" (Charteris-Black 2019: 76).

Not least important, both editorial cartoons and memes have representational value, being "cultural practices" through which meanings are produced and exchanged "between the members of a society or group" (Hall 1997: 2). Operating through the "shared conceptual maps" (18) of a community, the images they construe are both "vehicles of meaning in culture" (6) and a reflection of the discourses, i.e., "ways of referring to or constructing knowledge about a particular topic or practice" (6) that shape current societal views. Whether they seek to reinforce or challenge commonly held attitudes and beliefs, such representations "negotiate normality and opposition in their everyday practices", becoming thus "a viable tenet of political persuasion" (Denisova 2019: 35).

One locus channelling the interest of the present paper relates to their "use of discursive politics perspectives … when approaching issues of gender equality" (Lombardo and Meier 2014: 12), because it is here that both editorial cartoons and memes may provide "indications about the interdynamics of gender roles, patriarchal culture and ideology" (Edwards & Chen 2006 q. in Reyes García 2013: 39).

Gender and stereotyping
A basic core of feminist critical theory (Robinson & Richardson 1997) emphasises the role "patriarchy" plays in the construction of gender by foregrounding oppositions that are inherently hierarchical, since masculinity (conceived as active, domineering, forceful, reasoned and logical) is always privileged over femininity (characterised as the lesser term: passive, submissive, weak, emotional and intuitive).

Such binaries extend to social positioning, differentiating between a masculine public sphere and a feminine private one, which reverberates in the space of politics by symbolically conceiving it as the province of men: if nations are allegorically represented through feminine tropes, states and their rulers are 'manly': "the political lion skin has a large mane and belonged to a male lion, it is a costume for men" (Pateman 1995 q. in Lombardo & Meier 2014: 12), and one should not forget that even Elizabeth I had to legitimate herself in one the defining moments of her reign by casting her imperial persona in male terms: "I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too." Hence,

the concept of "political women" still seems to many "an oxymoron, an impossibility that can translate in visual representations that either discipline women or try to re-inscribe them into their traditional space" (Reyes García 2013: 41) through the use of negative images and gender stereotypes. A similar view is restated by Judith Baxter in her study on the representations of women leaders in the British press: "At times, women are demonised through explicit gender stereotyping, and at other times, the discrimination is barely noticeable, but implied through subtle innuendo, humour, hinted assumptions and even patronising forms of praise. In many cases, the use of gender stereotyping sends out the message to readers that women are unsuitable for leadership" (2018: vii).

Defined as "a way of representing and judging other people in fixed, unyielding terms" (Pickering 2015), stereotyping condenses, flattens, and homogenises whole groups or individuals within groups by assigning them to a category carrying specific traits. Stereotypes are a means of making sense of the world through simplified mental schemata, and are commonly used in jokes, or other forms of humour. Editorial cartoons, which resort to visual and verbal codes which are known to and agreed upon by their targeted readers, repeatedly exploit stereotypes both for their comic possibilities and as a handy visual script to encode otherwise complex messages. The same strategy holds true in the case of many internet memes, which aim both at triggering humour and at condensing "complex social relations into a single image" (Carter 2016: 34).

Nevertheless, when describing or prescribing different roles or characteristics to men and women in terms of gender typecasting, stereotyping is not simply a reflection of social arrangements based on patriarchal norms, but also an ideological intervention meant to counteract perceived threats to such norms by reducing their manifestations to familiar categories. Such is the case of women who access to power in male-dominated spheres, as Rosabeth Moth Kanter's pioneering study on *Men and Women of the Corporation* (1993) has potently made the case. Published initially in 1977, at a time when women leaders were largely outnumbered by their male peers, the study advances the concept of "tokenism" (the low proportion in the numerical composition of a group) to account for the different pressures to which women in male dominated roles are exposed: visibility (standing out from the group); contrast (exaggerating their differences);

assimilation (distorting individual characteristics to fit a familiar stereotype). With regard to the last of these, Kanter (1993; also Baxter 2018) further argues that the afore-mentioned group are typecast or pushed into four reassuring "role traps", which are capable of assimilating them to "familiar, historical archetypes of women in authority" (Baxter 2018: 24): the "mother" (assigned a "traditional nurturant-maternal role"); the "seductress" (perceived as "sexually desirable and potentially available"); the "pet" (considered "a cute, amusing little thing", immature, non-threatening and often chosen as a "mascot" by the male group); and, finally, the "iron maiden" (represented as "tough" and "dangerous" due to excessive masculine traits) (Kanter 1993).

From among these four role-traps, two seem particularly suited to address instances of gender stereotyping and typecasting in editorial cartoons and internet memes that employ images of highly visible women politicians like Hillary Clinton, Theresa May and Viorica Dăncilă. While the "iron maiden" role seems to prevail in the visual and discursive representations of Clinton and May in response to political events of American and British recent history, Romanian texts which target the country's first woman prime minister, Viorica Dăncilă, often construct her by adhering to the gendered stereotype of the "pet", an amusing but witless mascot for her government and, more specifically, her party leader. [1]

Iron maidens vs. the witless pet
Both Hillary Clinton and Theresa May are established actors on the American and British political scenes, the first as former Secretary of State, First Lady and Democratic woman candidate which made it to the final round of the 2016 American presidency elections, while the second built a political career from Member of Parliament to Home Secretary and Leader of the Conservative Party, to be appointed as the second woman British Prime Minister from 2016 to 2019. As an obvious example of women making a profession in the masculine sphere of politics, both figures have been in the spotlight of editorial cartoons and memes that often use gender frames and stereotypes in their visual-verbal content.

A number of studies (Bordo 2017; Heiskanen 2017; Gallagher 2019) document the role played by such texts in constructing what are generally negatively coded representations in response to the perceived

threat of women going against patriarchal norms. One strategy is to place them within scenarios that reverse gender roles and typecast their targets as "iron maidens". As Baxter explains: "The iron maiden is seen as unnaturally virilised in so far as she is considered to speak and behave aggressively, and she is routinely represented … as 'scary', 'tough', 'mean', 'hard', 'bullying', 'calculating' and perhaps 'bitchy'" (2018: 26).

This is most evident in the case of Clinton, where, during the 2016 presidential campaign, numerous cartoons played on gender reversals, by portraying a "masculinised" Hillary, typically "unwomanly" dressed, wearing pantsuits that covered a grotesquely drawn, plump feminine body. An emotionless (and often portrayed as aged, with the distinguishing dimples and half-grin) face on which the thickly drawn male eyebrows contrasted with mimicked femininity icons (lipstick and earrings, sometimes accompanied by a necklace of pearls) could easily be seen as an index of an "unnatural" masculine will to power.

For example, Daryl Cagle, "General Hillary" (2016), published on the artist's website (cagle.com), employs a bottom-up perspective to present the viewers with an oversized body dressed in an olive-green military uniform from which a disproportionally small head (with Clinton's iconic dimples, half-grin and exaggerated thick eyebrows complemented by her no less characteristic popping up cheeks and blonde hair) protrudes. As such, the composition could allude to Abraham Bosse's frontispiece for Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651), wherein one finds a similarly over-sized figure standing for Sovereign Authority.

Nevertheless, Bosse's "Leviathan", with the head of the King and the immense body made up of his subjects, faces straight ahead, engaging the viewers; Cagle's "General" is drawn from a 2/3 view, so that Hillary's gaze is averted away, severing the bond with the viewer, while the latter's focus is shifted to the grand centre of the piece, represented by the gold embroidery and the array of medals and ribbons lavishly displayed on three rows on the uniform, which, read intervisually, relates "General Hilary" to Nazi or Russian military leaders with uniforms dripping with medals. At a closer look, the decorations reveal themselves as pin-backed buttons that iconically reproduce their accompanying labels which read like: "BROKEN HEART", "STOOD BY MY MAN", "NO BAKING COOKIES",

"DOGING BULLETS", or "VOTE FOR WAR IN IRAN". On the one hand, these trivialise the masculine stereotype of leadership Clinton is supposed to emulate by recasting it in the feminine space of domestic misconduct and (non)traditional homemaking; on the other hand, they reinforce it through the reference to warfare that triggers terms from its associated semantic fields (conflict, destruction, death) inviting us to see Clinton as the ruthless and cruel blood-thirsty leader, the implied enactment of her "iron maiden" persona.

In its turn, an important strand of internet memes circulated during the 2016 presidential race (especially the ones posted on the "Women for Trump" Facebook groups) makes use of an excessive range of negatively coded representations to suggest that Clinton embodies an aberrant femininity, transgressing gender-normative behaviours and expectations. Such memes grotesquely deform the woman politician to emphasise the dangers entailed in the abuse of (masculine) authority by portraying her as a mad dictator, more often than not her character merging with that of Hitler (Figure 1), demonising her as a witch (Figure 2) or even a blood-thirsty Lady Macbeth (Figure 3), because "[i]n the show of toughness, there may also be a touch of madness: the Lady Macbeth persona" (Baxter 2017: 26).
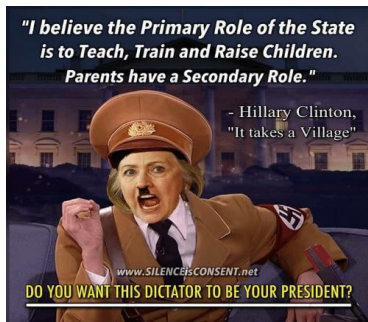
Hillary Hitler.

F**igure 1.** "Hillary Hitler" memes [2].
Source: https://ballmemes.com/t/hillary-hitler

Figure 2. "Hillary Witch" meme
Source:
https://imgflip.com/tag/hillary+witch

Figure 3. "Lady Macbeth" meme
Source:
https://makeameme.org/meme/lady-macbeth-while-b7ce4da8ef

In a similar manner, Theresa May is often typecast in the "iron maiden" role especially in relation to the Brexit crisis. For example, "Steel of the New Iron Lady" (2017) is the editorial title that accompanies a cartoon signed Mac (pen name of Stanley McMurtry) which appeared in *The Daily Mail*. While the article occupies two thirds of the cover page, the drawing is set to the left, visually commenting on the information dealing with May's "deal or no deal" ultimatum to the European Union. The image denotes a grey-haired woman with sunken cheeks, eye bags, shrunken lips and a long Pinocchio-like nose, wearing a green checked trousers suit fitted with a white shirt. Hands on her waist, the figure (easily identifiable as May) tilts her head upwards in a stubbornly defiant posture as the British flag is raised up a pole next to her, while the European one rests under her feat. Her victor's pose is nevertheless ironically undercut by its setting: 'splendidly isolated', May is standing on the edge at the top of a steep cliff, about to fall in the abyss below. In Morton Morland's "Election" (2017), which appeared as a cover for *The Spectator* during the 2017 General Election, May is literally clad in armour, taking centre stage, while Jeremy Corbyn is placed on the second plane, to her left, riding a toy unicorn. Yet, 'steel' tiles from May's knight's armour (humorously shaped as a lady's dress) are literally falling off, lying scattered around her, despite the character's seemingly frantic attempts at holding them in place with her hands and arms. Other cartoons portray her cornering opposition either on top of a machine gun or by firing canons (as obvious phallic symbols) or even partaking Winston Churchill's persona, like in Kevin Siers' "Brexit Plan" (2019), where the mantra of his 'finest hour' speech is parodied

and negated in the accompanying dialogue bubble that reveals May's thoughts as: "We will go to the end… We will lose on the beaches, we shall lose on the landing grounds, we shall lose in the fields and in the streets, we shall lose in the hills …" Throughout these cartoons, May's masculinisation is nevertheless cut down and made awkward by indexes of femininity like lipstick and earrings, pearl necklace and purse, and invariably May's famous leopard print kitten hill shoes, for long in the limelight of media attention.

Internet memes play their part in conflating the British woman politician's persona with masculine tropes and, as such, they may also be seen as adhering to the same "iron maiden" trope which they exploit to achieve their rhetorical purpose. One telling example is the "Theresa May takes the Iron Throne" meme (Figure 4), a reaction photoshop incongruously placing May in a still from the *Games of Thrones* series and showing her leading a body of knights on their marauding mission. Other memes either reuse the 'leadership' scenario in an action movie setting in which May becomes a Wonder Woman heroine, heading a detective squad (Figure 5), or humorously comment on her political persona by linking it to male avatars famous for ill-fated choices (Figure 5), or, the same as in Clinton's case, go to extreme vilification, by showing her as both dictator and embodiment of evil (Figure 6).

Theresa May takes the Iron
Throne (possible game of
thrones spoilers)

Figure 4. "Game of Thrones" meme
Source:
https://me.me/i/t-%E4%B8%96-
theresa-may-takes-the-iron-throne-
possible-game-1387735

Figure 5. "Action Theresa" meme
Source:
https://www.memecenter.com/fun/6
804603/theresa-may

Figure 6. "Theresa Dances" meme
Source:
https://cheezburger.com/7146245/
these-theresa-may-memes-are-
awkwardly
-dancing-into-infamy

Figure 7. "Evil May" meme
Source: https://imgflip.com/i/1qg8ln

At the opposite pole, one finds the case of Viorica Dăncilă, the first Romanian woman politician to access the premiership of the country in 2018. As Oprea (2019) comments: "the positive connotations" of her appointment which lent Romania the status of a "modern and emancipated country, giving equal opportunities to women and men in politics" were soon dispelled by "allegations against the new Prime Minister, considered incompetent and as a mere puppet in the hands of the ruling party" (75), identified with its controversial leader, Liviu Dragnea. Such negative perceptions were mainly popularised through varied media outlets, ranging from print to broadcast and the internet, and encompassing both traditional and social media forms, with editorial cartoons and memes maximising the impact through their humour-based visual rhetoric. Hence, a major strain of representations typecast Dăncilă as Dragnea's "pet", in keeping with the stereotypical perception of women as "too weak, naïve, or unprepared to handle a difficult task without a man's help" (Carlin & Winfrey 2009 q. in Reyes García 2013: 23).

A case in point is Devis Grebu's cartoon "Yooo, Vasilica!" ["Făăă, Vasilicooo!"] (2018) which appeared on the website of *Digi24* (a Romanian news channel) as part of a weekly series of satirical illustrations called "The Visions of Devis Grebu". This depicts Dăncilă taking an eye examination. She sits behind a phoropter, while in the forefront, Dragnea stands upright, wearing a doctor's gown and

holding a Snellen chart to test her vision. The text caption above reads "Ophthalmologist of Teleorman" (a punchline underlining the modest Romanian county from where both Dăncilă and Dragnea originate). The pictorial representation frames a series of incongruities: both figures are obviously disproportioned, with oversized heads above small bodies; the 'doctor' is frowning, in an impatient posture that indicates his loss of temper, while the 'patient' is starring impassively ahead (not focalizing the chart), with a fixed smile on her face; mirror written, the letters on the eye chart do not reveal the customary Snellen pattern, but the first letters of the alphabet, replicated in bigger size on a screen placed behind Dăncilă, as if projected through her (empty) head and magnified by the lenses of the phoropter. Significantly, the title accompanying the cartoon (playing the role of a dialogue bubble) which reveals Dragnea's exasperate urge ("Yooo, Vasilica!... Do something!... Look, repeat after me: aaa…bee…cee") sustains the educational metaphor and links it to a primary school alphabet lesson, with Dragnea and Dăncilă cast as teacher and pupil, respectively. In addition, the inscription on Dragnea's medical gown pocket reads: Dr Daddy, with the role of a child now assigned to Dăncilă, who holds doll-like puppets (with her government members' faces) in her lap. The "schoolgirl" scenario (upheld by the white collar accessorizing her pink "girlish" dress) is destabilized by caricature which foregrounds feminine tropes of aging, such as a massive body, fat cheeks, wrinkles, and a double-chin – in a grotesque appropriation of the stereotype of "the dotty old dear". Overall, the cartoon outlines hierarchies of power (doctor – patient, standing – sitting, forefront – rear, vocal – mute, active – passive, master – pupil, parent – child, puppeteer – puppet, normative masculinity – incoherent femininity) that position Dăncilă as the lesser, marginal and subordinate figure, reiterating thus popular views on the Prime Minister as a powerless and inappropriate political actor.

Such themes permeate online visuals. One finds them reiterated in many satirical illustrations which present Dăncilă as Dragnea's puppet, as is the case with Cristian Stanciu's "Vasilica Viorica Dăncilă" (2018), a political digital caricature in which Dragnea (drawn with an oversized head) appears as a ventriloquist, performing his act in front of an unseen audience: while his right hand holds a microphone close to his mouth, his right hand, directed at the public, moves a marionette (dressed in the traditional women's clothes from the rural area of Teleorman) which has Dăncilă's similarly oversized head and her

hairstyle (an obvious icon for the woman politician, due to it being repeatedly trivialised by the media). In addition, numerous photoshopped memes efface her personality by replacing the Prime Minister's face with that of her mentor (Figure 8) or reuse the schoolgirl scenario recontextualizing it in past and present temporal frames (Figure 9) that further deprecate Dăncilă's status as mature political leader. Similarly, other representations literally signal her as the "odd woman out" the masculine (and masculinized) political scene by showing her isolated and "misplaced" (by virtue of gender, dress-code, chromatology, pose and behaviour) among male figures that epitomize "proper" political leadership (Figure 10).

Figure 8. "Dragnea-Dăncila" meme
Source:
https://www.facebook.com/Meme-PSD-238336840426661/

Figure 9. "Dăncilă at school" memes
Sources: https:// www.facebook.com /duamnaviorica/ photos/la-voi-cum-a-fost-prima-zi-de-scoala-eu-am-un- invatator-tare-bun-pacat-ca-e-la-p/1373139989529775/(left); https://www.comedymall.ro/deja-fu/cristina-topescu-vrea-sa-o-invete-pe-dancila-sa-scrie-si-sa-citeasca-corect-17854932/(right)

Figure 10. State officials' meeting meme. Source: https://www.ziaruldeiasi.ro/stiri/foto-o-poza-cu-dancila-sursa-de-meme-uri-pe-retelele-de-socializare--190405.html

Not least important are those editorial cartoons and memes which systematically resort to the stereotype of the "witless blonde" to magnify the negative perceptions of Dăncilă's lack of intelligence. A telling example is Octav Ungureanu's cartoon "Message" (2018) which appeared on the artist's blog. The image presents Dăncilă (iconically constructed through hairstyle, broad smile, pink dress and awkward posture) sitting in the spotlight (suggesting an embarrassed and nervous attitude) and holding a piece of paper in her hands (yet, below the waist) as if preparing to start delivering a speech in front of an audience. Nevertheless, the focused light of the scene reveals the composition of the latter as a largely inanimate one: a boot, a plant in a flower pot and a nut (which, in Romanian, trigger semantic associations with stupidity and dumbness through their respective series of idiomatic expressions), while the text of the dialogue bubble linked to Dăncilă ironically conveys her thoughts as: "Now I can finally say that I am the smartest in this room!". The same stereotype is overwhelmingly present in countless internet memes that lampoon the woman politician: for example, in a meme mimicking a comparison chart, the boot metaphor resurfaces to signal Dăncilă's inappropriateness as political leader in terms of education, intellect and credibility, for, under the two headings "Dăncilă" and "The Boot", the areas of comparison on the left read as: "she/it knows foreign languages"; "she/it has read a least a book"; "she/it has discerning power/can decide for her/itself"; "she/it lasts longer than 6 months" (Figure 11); in another widely circulated meme, with many variants, the text captions accompanying the juxtaposed images of a female android and Viorica Dăncilă label the two as "artificial intelligence" vs. "natural stupidity" (Figure 12).

Figure 11. Comparison grid meme
Source: https://www.stiripesurse.ro/ cele-mai
-tari-glume-dupa-criza-politica-viorica-dancila-si
-mihai-tudose-inta-ironiilor_1243548.html

Figure 12. "Natural stupidity" memes
Sources: https://www.picuki.com/media/
2208728525563872967 (left); https://ro.
pinterest.com/mariavoila/haioase/ (right)

Conclusions

All three surveyed cases prove that cartoons and memes which satirically target women leaders tend to perpetrate stereotypes and limiting views of gender, albeit through verbal-visual forms of humour, mockery or caricature. If satire, their common end, is generally considered "to encourage resistance, promote dialogue, and enact positive change" (McClennen & Maisal 2014 q. in Oprea 2019: 90), when applied to female politicians it obviously echoes patriarchal prejudices that deny women's accession to traditionally man-dominated spheres of power by typecasting them into reassuring role-traps, either as unnaturally "strong" and "manly" women (Hillary Clinton and Theresa May as "iron-maidens") or as inappropriately "weak" and "womanly" ones (Viorica Dăncilă as the "witless pet"). This vacillation between the two gender stereotypes may be related (as Gallagher does in her study of British political cartoons) to an attempt to 'securitise' the perceived threat entailed in the various degrees of authority or prestige women politicians command at a given time in the public sphere: "[m]asculinisation at a period of political credibility and feminization at a period of weakness is recognizable" (2019).

In addition, such gendered representations may be explained by the fact that editorial cartooning has remained "a boy's club" (Morton 2017), with its professionals being overwhelmingly male, which is also generally true for meme creators and sharers (Denisova 2019). Yet, one should not forget that they are part of the wider reservoir of images circulated by the different forms of media, which offer us both records of public controversies that affect a community, as well as clues to the discourses which normalise "homo politicus". Unravelling their representational tactics may thus illuminate the real "ideological and rhetorical barriers that limit women's presence in politics" (Reyes García 2013: 4), opening up this space for women to assert their agency along with their male peers, no longer fearing to be marked as the "odd (wo)man out" solely by virtue of their gender.

Acknowledgement

Notes
[1] The overviewed corpus consisted of editorial cartoons and memes spanning the period 2016-2019 mainly found by searching online databases (which included newspaper archives, cartoonists' blogs, meme blogs and Facebook pages, among others) with keywords like: "political cartoon", "meme", "Hillary", "2016 American elections", "May", "Brexit", "Dancila", "Veorica", etc. Due to space constraints, only a few were selected to illustrate the argument. In addition, since cartoons are copyrighted, solely examples of memes were provided as visuals in the figures included in the paper.

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